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Beyond Innocence and Cynicism: Concrete Utopia in Social Work with Drug Users

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Abstract

The article identifies a problem in socio-cultural-historical activity theory (SCHAT) with ignoring how hope and power constitute the theory itself, and suggests that this is why the tradition faces a bad choice between functionalist or utopianist reductions of its own social relevance. Currently, remedies for this kind of (perhaps shammed) innocence can be found in Foucauldian and Latourian approaches to knowledge. However, since these appear to presuppose the (often feigned) cynicism of a purely negative standpoint that fits all too smoothly into the neoliberal management it describes, this presents us with an impossible choice or oscillation at another level. To get beyond it, we need the frankly self-reflected standpoint of ideology critique and the articulation of 'concrete utopia', i.e. real possibilities for social transformation. The approach is then realized and exemplified as part of an emergent practice research in the field of drug treatment. The field is broadly described as moving toward certain kinds of recognition of users' standards, but also as filled with paradoxes that allow us to intervene with theory. One of these (sets of) paradoxes concerns the relations between state and civil (bourgeois) society that are played out in drug treatment. Contrary to the doxa of New Public Management, the (welfare) state's normative power has not dissolved, only hides from itself. An immanent critique of practices and ideas in the field leads to the suggestion that its forms of recognition imply both submission of users, and the creation of positive standards and collectives. To intervene in this set of issues, we must expand the SCHAT reading of its own Hegelian-Marxist legacy, against the dominant liberal and scientific trend, to engage with theories of recognition. A contemporary, participatory concept of recognition is sketched, which seeks to sublate (include and supersede) submission into the building of the generalizing ethics of a collective.

Introduction

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*

Marx, 3rd Thesis on Feuerbach

In an epistemology of practice, it is only as ‘revolutionary practice’, as practice engaged in radical social transformation, that social theory can be what Uffe Juul Jensen (1999) calls “just-in-time”, that is, reflect itself as situated in Praxis and in History¹, rather than either seeking to outline in the abstract the correct principles that ought to be implemented (as in Kant’s Enlightenment rationalism), or retreating to a futile looking back on socio-cultural transformations that led up to its own emergence (as in Hegel’s metaphor of philosophy as the “owl of Minerva [that] begins its flight only with the onset of dusk” {Hegel, 1968}).

But is ‘revolutionary’ really up-to-the-minute? In the summer of 2012, the term is much discredited in Denmark, as mainstream politicians use their media power to portray the Left as a crowd of outmoded, violent romantics. Some leftists acknowledge a need for modernization of terminology, and explain that the idea is not so extremist after all, while others maintain that it is precisely the radicalism of its social critique that, in these times of crisis (of economy as well as of economics), attracts such numbers to the Left that it has provoked a counter-attack; and that its long and sundry history should not be considered a flaw but a resource.

In any case, what Derrida (1994) called the “work of mourning”, the reassessment of the Marxist legacy after 1989, is far from completed. One field where we have still some work to do is socio-cultural-historical activity theory (SCHAT)². Jensen’s article on a “philosophy just-in-time” did part of this work, by sketching how SCHAT researchers could articulate and realize an epistemology of practice with a specific reading of Marx’ Feuerbach Theses: Jensen’s Marx did not tear apart the relation of research to practice into two faintly connected regions: the description of (harmful or inevitable) states of affairs, and the identification of utopian essences. Instead, he proposed an immanent critique, a contentious articulation of real tendencies with which we might align our research in a struggle for social transformation³.

The present argument seeks to continue this “work of mourning” in a way that addresses the issue of radicalism, or the revolutionary nature of this program. Although I shall portray it as neither romantic nor violent, it does crucially imply that *hope* and *power* belong to the relevance that defines social theory as a living practice – and that these are aspects that have not been sufficiently theorized in SCHAT. Thus, the article begins with a critique of ‘scientistic’ tendencies in SCHAT to underestimate power in order to protect a mostly unspoken hope. This makes it relevant to critically adopt approaches that focus precisely on power – in this case, those of Foucault and Latour – and so, the road is paved for a brief sketch of the overall framework of ideology critique. In line with the idea of an immanent critique, SCHAT is here understood to be a *critical* psychology: A kind of theory that can only

¹ The capital letters and the spelling of Praxis with an x are meant to signify that these terms are conceived as in the broadly dialectical traditions, as demanding a radical de-centering of the analytic perspective. See Bernstein, 1971.

² I use the acronym SCHAT because the distinction sometimes made between ‘socio-cultural’ and ‘cultural-historical’ activity theory is not relevant to the present discussion. As always, this homogenization of a complex tradition to ‘one theory’ is as problematic as it is inevitable.

³ This is the Marx who would make clear that “Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence” (Marx & Engels, 2000, p. 14).

establish conceptual foundations by relentlessly reworking bodies of knowledge or science that are at play in the practices it engages with – what Brown & Stenner (2009) call “creative and reflexive foundationalism”. So, in the latter part of this article, we shall engage with discourses and practices in the field of social work with drug users. This is meant to be both a vehicle and a measure: the field presents us with practices, objects and dilemmas that are taken as prototypical (cf. Nissen, 2009b; 2012a), and are thus meant to help articulate problems and possibilities, as well as gauge their relevance.

But allow me to first remind readers that we are among friends. The theories discussed here are only invited because they are all interesting and insightful conversation partners.

Innocence or Cynicism

Functionalism and utopianism: Two kinds of innocence

Some versions of SCHAT share with most (other) discourses claiming some relevance for social work (or education) a Modern tendency to neglect or bracket precisely hope and power. This innocence seems to take two opposite forms, each as positions where people are struggling with the contradiction – functionalism and utopianism.

We can identify functionalist tendencies in the widespread adoption and reformulation of Leontiev’s wishful convergence of the subject’s motive with social goals – such as in many analyses using Engeström’s triangular model of ‘activity system’ (1987; see also Langemeyer & Roth, 2006), or in Hedegaard’s theory of childhood practices (2011): The ‘social needs’ and ‘object-motives’ that the researcher identifies appear to be exempted from controversy as anonymous, objective forces that impose a logic on activity and thereby on subjectivity itself.

Thus, to take one example, Hedegaard explains

Leontiev’s theory of children’s activities starts with the concept of primary needs, but when a child’s need ‘finds’ its object, the object becomes the need. From the newborn being an individual he/she becomes a personality through acquiring the object motives of society. (...) The activity of the subject is always directed towards the transformation of an object that is able to satisfy some specific need (Davydov et.al., 1983). Then the relation is turned around from being *need – activity – object/motive* and becomes *object/motive – activity – need*. It is through the child’s inclusion in social relations that this turnaround takes place (ibid, p. 16).

Just as in sociological functionalisms such as that of Talcott Parsons (who draws on Freud for the purpose), this idea of a socialization presupposes a set of a-social ‘primary needs’ which are then somehow effaced or metamorphosed (sublimated) to converge as motives with the objects that can be defined through the structures of institutional practices⁴. Thus, it is easy to identify, by “following the actions” of Laura, a child of 10, a “social situation of development characterized by a leading motive – doing what you should do in school” (ibid, p. 23) – provided, of course, that we are not alerted by some deviance to search for other motives and thus activities.

⁴ I owe this critique of Leontiev’s functionalism and the role of his reductionistic concept of needs to Ute Osterkamp’s groundbreaking *Motivationsforschung* (1976).

Hedegaard's interpretation of Laura's "leading motive" to be "doing what you should do" is wonderfully blunt; yet, even as power stares us in the eye, we are in no way advised to consider it at all. Functionalism achieves its status as science by bracketing or ignoring the link between subjectivity and power: It presents itself as merely reconstructing how things work, whether as fulfillment of given tasks (as in Hedegaard's analysis here) or as self-reproduction⁵. With concepts like 'object-motive', we seem to have a key to the autonomous workings, the machinery, of subjectivity – but the premises are set by the researcher, typically as relevant to a given practice and its management (e.g. theoretical knowledge as object-motive in school learning). We can also identify, here (most visibly in the works of Engeström and associates), the continuous struggle to get beyond this functionalism through the introduction of concepts such as contradiction, history etc. – concepts that, in this context, however, work as symptoms of the problem rather than its remedy, since they are designated as objects (i.e. as things that are dealt with) rather than constitutive of the practice of research itself.

In opposition to this kind of functionalism, in Blunden's recent theory of collaborative projects (2010) and in many applications of Lave & Wenger's theory of communities of practice (1991), these units of analysis are established precisely as utopian spheres, as universally human in distinction from perversions that follow from illegitimate power (see also Nissen, 2011). Thus, here, power is in a way constitutive, but mostly as the impetus for the jump to an 'innocent' realm of practice (designated as collaboration, community, everyday life, situated learning etc.). This is then the truly human substance of activity, which figures as the alternative to existing oppressive formal structures, and at the same time is seen as more real than those structures as reproduced in mainstream theories. Again, here we find continuous attempts to deal with the contradiction, as numerous reminders of the external, empirical reality of conflict. Lave & Wenger's book was even conceived as a way of dealing with community without denying power and conflict, even as it presented universal assumptions about a kind of situated learning and a kind of community that would be impeded by conflict and alienated by structure. Of course, the moment that such a community is specified, analyzed, put to some use (as what Jean-Luc Nancy, 1991, would call an 'operative community'), then it has turned 'structural', and thus the contradiction reappears in full force as internal to the research itself, as the corruption of this research. The only way to avoid this seems to be retreating to dualist notions of purely analytical concepts that refer to nothing beyond becoming. Thus, in Jean Lave's reflections on the concept of community of practice (2008), she claims that it was never meant to be a thing to look for, only a way of looking, and only a set of questions about something emerging but not existing. Yet, surely, if the implication is that the theory cannot grasp its realization, its objectivity, then we are left with a nominalism that sits very uneasily with her epistemology of practice.

Lave's retreat to a dualism that effectively defends the theory's relevance by denying it brings it close to its seeming opposite: In philosophically reflected versions of functionalism such as those of Piaget, Luhmann, or Mintzberg, function is seen as purely ideal structure – a set of concepts that are internally related and only apply *insofar as* they apply, offered as a mere analytical frame – even if any

⁵ We can distinguish two kinds of functionalism, according to whether the unquestioned goal is external or internal to the system: Functionalism of task (linear) and functionalism of life (circular). Since the former can be elevated into the latter – as e.g. organizational tasks contribute to the reproduction of an organization – both are 'system theories' at bottom. But the question is never posed whether or why the overall system *should* survive, just as the mechanic does not need to know where the car he repairs is going, nor the doctor what is the meaning of the patient's life (see Nissen, 2012a, ch. 3, p. 57 ff.).

application of the theory implies an impurity that would blow away the epistemological house of cards completely, were it not for the convenient division of labor that protects theories from their dubious relevance.

Thus, the two positions share an attitude of assumed (or perhaps feigned) innocence, since power is treated as purely external to their theoretical work and core concepts. This positioning as innocent with reference to science as a special practice that is elevated from the concerns of (other) everyday practices and struggles, yet which still holds transcendent promises of truth and a better life, can be called *scientistic*. All through Modernity, scientism is a fairly understandable and widespread ideological form – since it expresses the internalist ethics of scientists – so it is no great surprise to see it even in traditions that seek to build on Marx.

From the perspective of a radical epistemology of practice, the dualist and scientistic retreat to ‘innocence’ can be regarded as an alienated (i.e. non-self-reflexive) expression of the theory’s relevance in radical social transformation, or ‘revolutionary practice’. Such abstract ideals can only be elevated (ascend) to the concrete in a process of alteration that involves the theorist herself and the questions she (pro-) poses. Jean Lave in fact realized this, and wrote her latest book (Lave, 2011) accordingly, as a (highly recommendable) reconstruction of her own process of apprenticeship in critical ethnography (even as she still seems to be trying to escape from the shadow of complicity by only rendering her own standpoint in extremely general terms).

But many others do not, and the effect of the alienation is that the theories are read (sometimes by the theorists themselves) in realist terms, as reduced, imperfect or approximate reproductions of the given reality, with its existing conditions and structures of power, despite the alleged timelessness of ideal function and the imaginary eschatology of utopia. Behind this realism lies typically the unreflected scientistic Grand Narrative of a science-based Modernization – an image of radical change yet under preservation of socio-cultural and political foundations.

Thus, the step to the seeming opposite standpoint of pragmatic realism, of an impure and cynical tactics, is not so long, after all. This step is performed everywhere, of course, and is what accounts for the relative prevalence of the theories. Regrettably, it is precisely that step which is the blind eye of the theories themselves. It is this blind eye that constitutes functionalism and utopianism.

The supposed powerlessness of cynicism

If we want to reflect it, we can learn from approaches to science studies that focus on just how knowledge is imbued with power. Foucauldian or Latourian critiques help us overcome the hypocrisy or self-deceit of the innocence of the functionalist / utopian Modernism in Academia. They remind us how humble and good-hearted academics have been key actors in the building of the modern world, with all its ugly aspects. Science, and this includes social theory, even critical social theory, even SCHAT – is of this world, it is powerful, and it is productive, far beyond the institutions of science themselves. If the concept of ‘power’ describes practices that objectify subjects and their activities (i.e. subject them to scrutiny and intervention), then power is at the root of all social theory. We are all in the business of social engineering – if by this we understand the science-mediated building of social life (and the ensuing struggles over whether that is done in technocratic or democratic ways)⁶.

⁶ I am aware that the term ‘social engineering’, to many readers, is exclusively pejorative. But I consider this linguistic convention to be part of a ‘standpoint of civil society’, an ideology that I want to help overcome: We

Retreating to ‘pure theory’ is impossible or, at least, it does not help us escape from the business. It only helps us ignore the impurity that gets our products sold, i.e. establishes relevance. Successful scientists, or social theorists, are those who can forge communities that link human and non-human, natural and cultural, subjective and objective entities, in new powerful ways.

These are important lessons from the Foucauldian and Latourian traditions. But they seem to have come to their understanding at a heavy price: That of not being able or allowed to understand *themselves* in the very same terms. It all rests on the dodgy epistemological premise of a purely *negative standpoint*: A standpoint defined only by what it negates.

In the account of itself, Foucauldianism can only ever deconstruct, open, refuse, disturb. We are never invited to reflect on the positivity of that negativity – what it produces, how it works as governmentality, how it shapes us. It is, paradoxically, the latest great and relatively successful attempt to escape from the very same inter-subjectivity of social research that it repeatedly declares as inescapable.

Latourian social critique defines itself explicitly against social critique (e.g. Latour, 2004, 2005), and its theory is presented as non-theory (almost echoing what we know from the positivist attempts to reconstruct a psychology without metaphysics): abstract minimalist concepts such as “entities”, “networks”, “associations”, “actants” etc. Latour reveals but repeats the unreflective Modernism of post-modernism, of wanting to clear away Modernism and replace it with something more true and untainted by false beliefs (Latour, 1993).

Both traditions are post-Marxist in their rejection of the legacy of an ideology critique they regard as a naïve and elitist essentialism. They pride themselves of not claiming to hold any privileged truths or visions of a better life. Thus making much of how they have tied their own hands, like in some Houdini trick, they entice us to see the power that other social theorists ignore, even to the point where we can see little else... except we somehow come to overlook precisely the power of Foucauldianism and Latourianism. The reduction to pure power, that is to say, is not only a reaction to the Modern, scientific pretense of ignoring it (the shammed innocence), but more fundamentally inscribed in the standpoint of post-structuralism and post-constructionism.

Just as we saw above in the functionalist and utopianist currents of SCHAT, power is externalized as object, only here in a much more thoroughgoing way. Foucault universalizes and ‘de-centers’ the concept of power as “actions upon other actions” (Foucault, 1982), abstracted from the singular, situated subjects who wield or is affected by that power. Similarly, at the core of Latour’s theory, and as such much debated in the ANT tradition, is a radically disembodied and ahistorical concept of power, in the shape of the autonomous construction of the world by the networking proclivities of entities with no (other) predicates. Either way, the question of the complicity of the theorist himself is avoided. It was an important step forward to expand the concept of power beyond what Foucault calls ‘sovereign power’ – the Master’s rule by threat of death – and, conversely, to problematize the humanistic idealization of the subject as a pre-given absolute (cf. Nissen, in press); but little is achieved if we must remain with abstract discourses and networks.

should engage in the struggles over that social engineering, rather define ourselves against it. It won’t go away. We’re part of it, and it’s part of ourselves. For this reason, I choose this odd, exoticizing terminology. See also Nissen, 2009a, 2012a.

This futile objectification of power is what *defines* these standpoints: When power is absolute and empty, all they can do is describe its mechanisms. Thus, powerlessness is internal to them when they think they have escaped it by conjuring up power as key and revealing its profanity. As they remain stuck with power itself as a negative abstraction, folding back any real future, any possibility of radical change, into the petty tactics of the present, they represent a pragmatic cynicism that is becoming extremely powerful as a way of dealing with the oscillations between the impure realism and the functionalist or utopian idealism we identified above.

This is of course why these theories work so well in the mainstream education of public servants that is such a big part of our jobs. The ethos and the technology of New Public Management is much about the pragmatic handling of putatively democratic or scientific abstract ideals in disenchanted institutional landscapes – that is, in institutions that have lost the ethical reference that once governed them as organs of bureaucratic and/or welfare states – in the service of shifting constellations of powers and interests (cf. e.g. Du Gay, 2000). One ubiquitous and quite transparent example is the way that evidence-basing is performed and works as ‘evidence light’ in public management (more on this below): High-brow scientific rhetoric combined with a pragmatics that shamelessly negates just that very same rhetoric, in the same moment it is spoken, performed by officials who are skilled both in science and in Foucauldian or Latourian meta-science.

That kind of cynical discursive or constructionist reflexivity can swallow anything except itself. One cannot simply call the bluff and reveal the lack of substance or consistency, since, in a negative epistemology, this will only be taken as praise. But sometimes, with simple questions such as “So what?” or “What’s the point?”, one can call forth all sorts of authentic utopian ideals that have survived untouched, beneath the surface irony, to secretly fuel the whole thing. It may ring strangely, but maybe we should consider the idea that the Nietzschean cynicism adopted as self-understanding in much post-structuralism is really an attempt to protect a soft core of an even more profound utopianism, or, in other words, a utopian horizon that has been pushed even more into the defensive, and as a result has become even more abstract and isolated, than that of the Marxist revolutionaries they mock so persistently...

From abstract power to politics, ideology and hope

My preliminary conclusion is this: without theorizing the utopia, or hopes, that fuel and guide our practices, including our theoretical and epistemological reflections, the exclusive focus on power is futile and just as self-deceptive as ignoring it. We have only come to be caught in another oscillation.

How can we escape? One way is to continue the ‘work of mourning’ and dive deeper into the broadly dialectical tradition for ways to understand hope. In these traditions, it should be noted, the concept of hope is not disconnected from that of practice, as something one sits and waits for (as one could think on the basis of the Latin etymology of *espérance*). Jensen’s reflections on the timeliness of social theory echo Ernst Bloch’s discussion of the category of real possibility (Bloch, 1967, 1995). Following Bloch, since practice is always directed toward imagined futures, abstract utopia cannot be replaced by simple factuality – since, as we have seen, the two feed from each other in a vicious circle – but only by “concrete utopia” that articulate “real possibilities” for social transformation.

To think in terms of such ‘real possibilities’ implies that the move to include the reflection of power as immanent to any practice and constitutive of subjectivity must connect with the political dimensions of these practices, for which that reflection *itself* may be emergently relevant. The (Modern) subject-

position of research itself as engaged in social transformation and ‘social engineering’ (in the sense stated above) can no longer hide from itself.

This requirement leads to a way of contextualizing social work practices in the current changes of power relations, discourses, and subjectivities, which is very different from the prevailing Foucauldian approach with its predominantly neutral and totalizing descriptions of micro-power and governmentality. Although we have learnt much from the Foucauldian broadening of the field of politics, far beyond ‘the political’ in the sense of political institutions, we can now also (or again) deal with political issues and concepts that the Foucauldians largely ignored, such as state sovereignty, recognition, equality and welfare.

Going beyond abstract power as such also means facing questions regarding the constitution of singular subjects (as collectives, institutions and participants - not just as subject-positions), as well as the material dimensions of their practice (resources, artifacts, spaces, habits – not just abstractly declared materiality and arbitrary thingness).

But above all, the concept of *ideology*, with its at once metaphysical and critical impetus – its reference to things that must be changed – and perhaps first of all its inter-subjective indexicality – its visibly situated standpoint – must be resurrected and reinserted into an epistemology of practice, that is, adopted and untied from the structuralist and psycho-analytic frameworks within which it has survived the past decades (e.g. in Højrup, 2003, or Žižek, 2004; see, to this, also Hänninen & Paldán, 1983, and Nissen, 2013). This is the cornerstone of a fruitful fusion of post-structuralism with SCHAT, because it reconnects the cultural-historical reflexivity of the former with the latter’s orientation to positivity, that is, to building consistent theory that is relevant for social transformation.

Contrary to what we would expect from some recent portrayals (e.g. Latour, 2005), the naïve realism of the cartoon image of ideology critique – the idea of claiming Truth against a false consciousness determined by structure – has long since been left behind in theories of ideology. There is no need for the defensive retreat to a negative standpoint. The articulation of standpoint is, indeed, a critical diagnosis of ways in which subjects and collectives reproduce restricted forms of agency; yet, at the same time, it is always itself a construction of collective agency, and as such open to another round of ideology critique. It does not except itself from the field it engages with. This self-critical ethos is characteristic of contemporary discussions of ideology, such as the ones mentioned above.

Bloch’s focus, the aspect of *hope* – the imagined futures that drive our practices at different levels – is a key to ideology, because it points to how collectives and subjects are not only constituted in discourse and power in the sense of a reproduction of a given form (in short, of function), but also and crucially in the meaning of potentials, of projects, of narrative projections. This is absent or only reflected in very limited forms, not only in post-structuralism and post-constructionism, but also in the structuralist and psycho-analytic conceptualizations of ideology; but it is strongly represented in narrative theory (e.g. Bruner, 1986; Mattingly, 2010; Mattingly, Jensen, & Throop, 2010). It is important because it is the point where our own interventions as social theorists could make a difference: A point of dialogue. The relevance of social theory is to provide ways to reflect and discuss how we are always oriented to transformations in what we do and what we are; not only transformations of Nature, but also of ourselves and our social world, and not only narrowly circumscribed relations or aspects, but also their wider and more radical presuppositions and implications. This latter sentence, in fact, is an attempt at a reformulation of Marx’s above quoted thesis about revolutionary practice.

I have written an extensive argument for this general approach in my recent book (Nissen, 2012a). The book bases primarily on dialogues with social work practices in the 1990s. In the following, I will try to exemplify the general points made above in my current field of empirical studies.

Exemplary Field: Paradoxes of Drug Practices

At the time of writing, we are at the early stages of a research project called *SUBSTANce – Subjects and Standards*⁷. The general point of the project is to study how subjects and standards create and perform each other, and to combine these studies closely with a systematic reflection on the role and impact of science itself. Basic socio-cultural-historical research into processes of standardization and subjectification points a way to bridging the existing gulf in research and intervention between, on the one hand, traditions for defining and using standards, and, on the other hand, traditions focusing on their description and critique.

In one sub-project, we work in the field of social work interventions into drug use; we investigate and take part in producing standards of everyday life with or without drugs, and standards of addiction counseling.

Recent trends in this field push toward recognizing users' own standards of 'recovery', rather than the scientifically derived standards of health and state intervention (e.g. White, W. 2007; see also Houborg, 2012, Nissen, 2012b). This takes several forms that sometimes fuse and at other times contradict or even work against each other: Eliciting user's self-conceptions and preferences and arranging professional practice in relation to those (harm reduction, cognitive and client-centered counseling); managing intervention as something that resembles a contract-based and more or less commercial service (New Public Management); or leaving the problem – albeit often with state resources – to self-help programs and volunteer programs.

Since such 'user-driven standards' are often constructed either as arbitrary individual preferences or as pseudo-religious communities, they run into tensions with the at once social and scientific objectivity that defines disease and treatment (to this latter, see e.g. Jensen, 1987, Mol, 2002, Thorgaard, 2010). These tensions we find in a lot of places in the field, as what appears to be 'effective' liberal measures – typically described as 'harm reduction', such as the provision of substitute drugs – clash with traditional constellations of normativity, metaphysics, and knowledge that have been built into the institutions and professions of the welfare state (in health care, social work, education, penal and judicial institutions etc.).⁸

However, it may be the case that this tension is gradually dissolving or at least moving. For instance, the definition of addiction in the WHO's *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD) does not establish an unquestionable, objective standard that the health care professionals can refer to when they are challenged by users and managers. Rather, it outlines a field of contestation: Dependence is

⁷ See <http://substance.ku.dk>. The two defining concepts, 'subjects' and 'standards', each have a rich and contradictory theoretical history which we cannot review here. See e.g. Nissen, 2012a and Busch, 2011. Note that both can be viewed as constituted reflexively in culturally mediated practices – as subjectification and standardization.

⁸ See Gomart (2004) for an example. A more subtle example is the widespread theory and method of "motivational interviewing" that pretends to build exclusively on users' preferences yet aims at effective behavior change. See e.g. Connors, Donovan, & DiClemente (2001).

A cluster of behavioral, cognitive, and physiological phenomena that develop after repeated substance use and that typically include a strong desire to take the drug, difficulties in controlling its use, persisting in its use despite harmful consequences, a higher priority given to drug use than to other activities and obligations, increased tolerance, and sometimes a physical withdrawal state.

(ICD-10 – F.10-19: Dependence syndrome)⁹

What counts as a strong desire, harmful consequences, and higher priorities? Who decides and how? These are not just questions that belong to some radical academic critique; they are what any addiction counselor must deal with as a matter of routine. This routine must somehow unfold in *common sense*, at least a sense common to the counselor and the people involved – client, relatives, and so on. These diagnostic criteria cannot be operationalized merely by objectifying the client as a body; s/he must be subjectified, too, that is, recruited to participate in this objectification.

In fact, it is plausible to say that the whole ICD conceptualization is gradually moving in the direction of common sense. All theoretical (etiological, causal, ontological) assumptions have been taken out of the diagnostic apparatus (cf. Bowker & Star, 1999, Timmermans & Berg, 2003). Yet, since theory remains immanent to any language and any practice, this really means that what has been taken out are those aspects of theory that stand out as different from common sense.

This way, the global standards of drug health are really left to be defined pragmatically and locally. When treatment is evidence-based¹⁰, managers and users no longer have to engage with esoteric theories that struggle with and contain – inevitably: contrasting, controversial – metaphysical and normative ideas. It is narrowed down to purely instrumental relations of cause and effect that anyone can understand and manage for any purposes.

Critics point out that such narrowly instrumental, evidence-based interventions (including the so-called “magic bullet drug” that cures the disease) not only still imply debatable theoretical assumptions, but even ironically reproduce the pattern of addiction itself (Sedgwick, 1993). It has been argued that it is precisely when we think of ourselves and how to deal with our complex problems in terms of isolated effects – in terms of ‘the fix’ – that we lose control (Bateson, 1972; Nissen, 2002). Further, there are many reasons to suppose that a strong condition underlying the current epidemic of addictions is the socio-cultural dislocation and individualization that is connected with modernity and free market societies (Alexander, 2008; Orford, 1992; Room, 1985).

These tendencies and paradoxes have been described clearly by Foucauldians, mostly as expressions of the governmentality of neo-liberalism (e.g. Keane, 2011; Rose, 1996, 1999; Valverde, 1998). But this is where our simple question from above gets to be relevant: So what?

Actually, in this field there has been developed an alternative kind of practice partly based on poststructuralist ideas: The narrative therapy tradition (White, M., 2005, 2007; Winslade & Cheshire, 1997). That tradition is interesting, because it has been put forward precisely as a kind of critical psychology that identifies the problem in society, and in our “culture of consumption” (White, 1997). Further, it is an interesting feature of this tradition that it is deeply ambivalent toward the idea of effect.

⁹ Downloaded March 2013 from WHO’s website <http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2010/en#/F10-F19>

¹⁰ Evidence-basing is the standardization of practices with reference to evidence of effect derived from scientific studies, mostly in the form of the so-called RCT, randomized controlled trial. See Timmermans & Berg, op.cit.

Mostly it stands opposite to the surge of evidence-based (cognitive) approaches by speaking of effect as the thickening of narratives and the ubiquitous postmodern ideal of opening some discursive multiplicity to agents. But it is not difficult to find examples of the fact that even that kind of therapy, in order to remain a therapy, must present itself as a cure. Those two ideas about effect are about as unconnected as Descartes' *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

The narrative therapy tradition also exemplifies in its own way the oscillation or dichotomy between cynicism and utopianism that I outlined above. On the one hand, narrative therapy can be rendered cynically as a technology for the pointless pragmatic manipulation of various discourses or narratives, the main thrust of which appears to be the emancipation of the individual and the skillful fabrication of an artificial ideological common sense to underpin this autonomy. On the other hand, we can identify – and perhaps identify with – utopian collectives that define and espouse authentic common values, against the individualizing and victimizing discourses of psychology and psychiatry. And, unsurprisingly, we can find debates around the concept of power that are quite similar to the present text (Fisher, 2005).

Thus we find here, in a nice, open and debatable way, some of the movements, chasms and paradoxes in relations between standard and subjectivity that our project seeks to investigate.

Our project explores the production of 'user-driven standards' in counseling institutions for young drug users in two Danish cities. The professionals of U-Turn, an institution for young drug users in Copenhagen, are developing a 'user-driven' approach based on narrative therapy and similar methodologies, and struggle to align it with the top management's demand for standardized documentation. Currently, the National Board of Social Services is disseminating the "U-Turn model" of intervention as a professional standard. We have a long history of collaboration with the U-Turn, and now we have begun to work with one of the local partners who are funded to implement the U-Turn model.

This is full of paradoxes, since the U-Turn-model, as described on the website of the National Board of Social Services, is defined as an alternative, not only to the prevailing ideas about addiction, but also to the idea of standard methodologies. What we are looking at, and participating in, is the transfer of a model that is actually defined as not transferable. At the same time we study how prototypes of youth life with or without drugs are created, generalized and transferred between various users in the local field, with the help of the counselors and their more or less narrative methods that stress how each person's narrative is unique.

We are not in any way discouraged by these paradoxes. Developing a practice research collaboration includes looking for paradoxes or contradictions from where the exchange and mutual co-construction of innovative practice with critical research can take off (Motzkau, 2009; Nissen, 2009b).

Let us look closer at one of them.

State and Civil Society – Or: One Way That Drug Counseling Practices Can Be Revolutionary

The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new materialism is human society or social humanity.

Marx, 10th Feuerbach Thesis

I quote Marx' 10th Feuerbach Thesis here because the specific paradox that I want to take up is about the relations between state and civil society.

Note, first, that the term 'civil society' in Marx' (as in Hegel) is translated from 'bürgerliche Gesellschaft', which could also be translated as 'bourgeois society'; it is not only the voluntary sector and its associations, but includes industry and market. As such, it stands opposed to the state, and at the same time comprises the general social unit, the 'society' that the state seeks to understand, nourish and control. It has not been split up into the images of 'good' interactions of free citizens versus 'bad' corporate power. Marx' standpoint of human society goes beyond the state, conceived as an instrument of the bourgeoisie (as Marx mostly conceived it), but it still stands opposed to a standpoint of civil / bourgeois society.

In my view, after various historical lessons from the time since Marx, the debates around the place of the state in a progressive strategy can no more stick with a liberal anti-statism than with the conservative statism that Marx criticized in Hegel. Marx' vision of the withering away of the state was (abstract) utopian and very unhelpful in the struggles that followed. All the places where some version and degree of socialism prevailed were also places where the state expanded far beyond the 'night-watch state' of the middle 19th century and began to perform a (more or less democratic) 'social engineering' in the sense described above.

Whether or not one agrees with my position on this, the political issue is important because reintroducing power into the framework of a cultural-historical approach means not only 'activism', but also (as mentioned) politics and the struggles over the building of state institutions.

This should actually be no surprise to a researcher with a SCHAT background, since SCHAT studies have documented in many ways the ever more outspoken tendency that welfare state institutions form part of the networks and communities of people's everyday lives. Thus, for instance, it is reasonable to regard today's Scandinavian nuclear family as an extended family that includes kindergartens, schools, after-school facilities etc. (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Højholt, 1999; Kousholt, 2011; Winther-Lindqvist, 2009). This is a concrete instance of the state's 'engineering' of the 'social' life of its citizens, and the SCHAT studies intervene in the struggles over how this is to be reflected and developed. And of course, this state expansion has not dropped down from the heavens in the first place; it has only been achieved through hard and creative work and tough (feminist and socialist) struggles. This has been and is a 'revolutionary practice' if ever there was one: Not in the sense of romantic violence and *coups d'état*, but in the sense of transformations of fundamental aspects of our culture (such as family structure and gender relations).

Currently, however, the New Public Management which is a strong ideology in the present governance of practices such as drug counseling (and in most other practices where a cultural-historical theory is relevant), is all about turning over state activities to civil society (in Marx' sense) and treating other state activities as if they were civil society. New Public Management, in short, is governance from a standpoint of civil society.

Like the kindergartens and schools, the work with 'user-driven standards' in drug counseling is a work of building welfare state collectives that go far beyond the ideology of New Public Management. In the counselors' own language, we might say that this articulation of their work 'thickens' the story of narrative therapy so that we realize how co-creating narratives is a practical creation and a political

struggle. The counselors may *appear* to be just (liberally) recognizing their users' own ideas about youth life, family life, and drug use – more or less against or combined with a (conservative) sanctioning of given standards. This appearance is produced if their work is articulated in the most prevalent discourses of the field itself – the opposition of 'harm reduction' versus 'control policies' or 'law-and-order' rhetoric. But in fact – that is, when articulated instead from a 'standpoint of social humanity' – they co-create the (social) everyday life of users. And they do it, to a large extent, in evolving and negotiated collaboration with not only users, but also professionals at other institutions such as schools, and with reference to social sciences, in a broad sense.

Another useful way to think of this is to use Annemarie Mol's (2008) distinction between articulating health practices according to the instrumentalistic and linear-causal "logic of choice" that is rising to dominance and threatens to erode the ethics of medical practice – and a "logic of care" that is oriented to enhancing health as concrete-general formations.

Currently, the drug professionals have the problem that they must disguise the kind of productive work they do in the language of civil society, the "logic of choice". So they either forget much of what they are doing, or they must keep double books (mostly both).

The Standpoint of Civil Society Splits Recognition Into Choice and Surrender

But the problem goes even further, and this is where we really run against the tide of ideology and at the same time must reconsider some basic assumptions in SCHAT. In other words, this is where the practices in this field can be taken as revolutionary in the sense that they transform basic aspects of our culture, including some that have defined the standpoint of research from which we ourselves have taken off – urging us to criticize in new ways the ideas of individual autonomy and agency. It is not only that we must add to the individualistic notions of autonomy some kind of contextuality and collectivity, as has always been a hallmark of SCHAT. It is also that the collective 'social engineering' of that contextuality – in a 'logic of care' – necessarily involves power, and that this entails moments of individuals' submission to collectives.

This is precisely a point that is highlighted in a special way in the drug field, as we glimpsed above: The modern individualistic instrumentalism that is expressed in epidemics of addiction can be seen as the running amok of just that autonomy. In the largest mutual-help movement in the field, the 12 step movements and programs such as Narcotics Anonymous, this insight is foundational (Bateson, 1972; Mäkela et al., 1996; Narcotics Anonymous, 2003; 2008; Rice, 1996; Valverde, 1998, 2002). The basic idea is that the individual must realize that she is an addict, that she is powerless against the disease of 'addiction' and has lost control of her life; and that she must surrender to something they call a 'Higher Power', which can be regarded as a symbolic, pseudo-religious representation of the community. Only through that submission can she be recognized ethically and in terms of the knowledge or experience that she has.

However, the 12 step ideology is limited by the standpoint of civil society that was always constitutional to modern religious movements in the USA (a strong legacy in the 12 steps movements). The consequence is that it must stick with the stark, unmediated contrast between on the one hand this surrender, and on the other hand the insistence that the person must choose it herself.

Further, often members at one and the same time have a deep-rooted belief in the authenticity of their addict identity and the necessity of surrender – *and* a postmodern ironic and pragmatic approach to it.

In fact, one can trace a pragmatic aspect deeply in the 12 step literature and rituals (cf. Narcotics Anonymous, 2003; Valverde, 2002). One striking example is Jacob Hilden Winsløw, a social constructivist sociologist in the field with some national fame (Winsløw, 1984, 1991) who suddenly came out as member of the NA. When asked about how he, as a social constructivist, could live with the crude essentialism of NA's concept of disease, he simply answered: "It works for me!"

Indeed, "*It works – if you work it!*", as the NA motto goes. The tautology that defines the collective at the same time conceals what it is that works and under which conditions. The problem that in fact many people choose to drop out, and why they do, becomes hidden because the language of the movement simply cannot challenge the basic premise of the standpoint of civil society, the '*if*' in the motto: the autonomy of free choice. This is all the more paradoxical since the movement itself bases on a critique of the radically abstract, thin nature of that autonomy, when it is regarded in the shadow of the 'disease'. Conversely, the standard and ritualized logic of the motto's '*it*' is reified and rendered absolute, so that it cannot be conceptualized how '*it*' is in fact continuously made and remade by its members.

The same dichotomy of choice vs. standard characterizes most sociological studies of the movement. Like most sociology, they accept as given the civil society premise of individual agency in society and thus some version of the classical Tönnies'ian community / association division (see, to this, Nissen, 2012a, ch. 3). Either the community is taken as given in a premodern fashion (which appears to explain the religious aspects), or it is an association chosen as a 'take-it-or-leave-it' package. Thus, even though some do point to the creation of communities of care as central (Leighton, 2006; Rice, 1996), the 12 step movement is generally accepted as a free association of citizens, and its '12 traditions' that codify this status are taken at face value (Mäkela et al., 1996). There is one strand that reveals how NA (in the USA) cannot really be considered a free civil society movement, since it has become an integral part of the state's coercive measures – e.g. membership is a requirement for help, prison parole, or even parenting (Peele, Bufo, & Brodsky, 2000; Carr, 2011) – but here, the implied suggestion is that citizens should be emancipated from such illegitimate coercion.

Of course, there is ample evidence of the failure of coercive measures per se, especially in weak, residual welfare states like the USA. But, however well-founded, these liberal critiques only send us back to square one, the 'first of 12 steps' question: What if the individual autonomy that we seek to defend is part of the problem, and some kind of surrender to the 'higher power' of some collective is in fact crucial to any solution?

This question is not only relevant in the approach to pseudo-religious mutual-help civil society communities; on the contrary, the almost universal rise to prominence of these communities, and their increasing infiltration with state powers and state institutions, urge us to consider the more general implications¹¹. Thus, to phrase it in more general terms: How can we articulate the recognition of drug users in ways that include power relations and moments of submission, along with the drug users' participation in transforming the institutions to which they surrender?

¹¹ All the more so in welfare states such as Denmark where this infiltration is much more than simply coercive: Most (state financed) drug-free residential treatment are based on, or heavily influenced by, the 12 step program, 12 step members abound as staff in state institutions etc.

Adopting Hegel's theory of recognition

One obvious way is to dig up – as part of our Derrida'ian “work of mourning” – Marx' Hegelian legacy. The idea that recognition proceeds through a moment of submission goes back at least to Hegel's so-called ‘dialectics of recognition’ or “Master and Bondsman” chapter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 2004, ch. IV A)¹².

Hegel's concept of recognition has been read and interpreted mostly in terms of some kind of Kantian formal universalism – a political correctness that deprives it of its emphasis on power or even reduces it to some version of the very ethics of individual subjective authenticity or rationality that Hegel spent much of his life criticizing (e.g. Fraser, 2000). Or conversely, as an early version of the Freudian drama of socialization that leaves the subject forever in alterity, not quite recognized, in relation to a static social structure personalized as the Father Figure or the Big Other (Butler, 1997, Žižek, 1999). On this background, it is quite understandable that many SCHAT and poststructuralists try to avoid the issue altogether if they do not relapse to a simple liberal particularism.

But some contemporary scholars of Hegel's theory of recognition (Butler, 1997; Højrup, 2003; Musaeus, 2005; Taylor, 1975, 1995; Williams, 1997; Žižek, 1999) can help us understand recognition in ways that are more compatible with an epistemology of practice, and which can help us theorize power and get over tendencies to functionalism or utopianism – even if at many points a further critical theoretical discussion would of course be useful¹³.

This theoretical project is complex, and really doing it justice would take us far beyond the limits of this article (I have unfolded it a bit more in Nissen, 2012a, ch. 7 and 8). But let us consider it for a page or two.

The most important points that should be taken from it all have to do with its *dialectical* character: Although Hegel's text is quite opaque, it clearly presents a development through opposing moments, such that an initial, superficial recognition is turned around into an existentially precarious submission, and then gets to be re-substantiated through the implications of that negation, which unfold as a labor that is alienated, but also productive and cultivating, eventually to overcome its alienation. In Hegel's dialectic, even if a tool – such as a slave is supposed to be a mere tool for the master – is projected as no more than a means to an end, the realization of the intention in practice always involves more, and includes a reconstruction of the ends¹⁴. This is referred to as the ‘cunning of reason’.

Although Hegel presents recognition as the relation of one “consciousness” to another, in the present reading, it is basically *participatory* (the philosophical case for this wider conceptualization is made,

¹² Axel Honneth (1995) argues that we should rather build on Hegel's earlier works that are not as troubled by his ambitions to a grand totalizing scheme. However, I suggest that we follow the argument of Williams (1997), Højrup (2003) and others that Hegel's concept of recognition should be read through his more unfolded social theory of his later works, since that mediation is key to its dialectics.

¹³ This even includes the psychoanalysts: although Butler and Žižek largely ignore praxis and participation, and remain within the misleading Freudian metaphor, they also work consistently to open the issue of recognition to politics, and, even more importantly, they help us see that recognition is existentially vital to subjectivity, connected with the very constitution of reflexive subjectivity. Another route to this insight could be the existentialist, from Hegel through Kierkegaard and Sartre.

¹⁴ This is a basic point in dialectics that has to be remade over and over. Thus, Latour (2002) makes the same point under the nice title “The end of the means”.

among others, by Williams, 1997). The relation ‘I – You’ always implies a ‘We’, and thus an ‘Us’ etc. This means that a crucial form is the collective’s recognition of the participant. In Althusser’s (1994) term, the participant is ‘interpellated’, recruited as potentially identical with the collective and its subject-positions (‘in God’s image’), and thus submits to participating in a given ideological form. This point implies an inter-subjective or “power” aspect of the process of acquisition, a moment of clash of wills and eventual submission, as a necessary element in the constitution of the individual subject as self-reflexive. Subjection is realized when the individual takes on the ideological form and participates in treating herself as an object (in a kind of ‘zone of proximal development’ of selfhood). Thus, in this theory, agency, when specified as recognized and self-reflexive, does in fact emerge through a moment of submission¹⁵. This point is similar to Foucault’s theory – although long before him, Kierkegaard, G.H. Mead and others had also taken it up from Hegel (and transformed it in different ways) – but it reinserts it in the framework of participation, ideology, and dialectics.

One implication of adopting this wider framework is that through her participation, the individual inevitably changes the collective in a ‘cunning of reason’. In Althusser’s example, a child is born into a pre-given position in a family, with her name already given. What Althusser does not mention, however, but as any parent knows, the child changes, reconstitutes the family in the same process. This points to the *transformations* of the *mutuality* of recognition: Recognition must include some kind of fusion of horizons, but not simply as *common sense*; rather, the initial moment of external (symmetrical) recognition of the Other (in common sense) is negated in a moment of (asymmetrical) submission, but this is then, in turn, negated in a reconstruction of *common meaning* that performs a critique or transformation of common sense. Note that this way of articulating the dialectics of recognition implies a reinterpretation of the sense/meaning distinction that Vygotsky and Leontiev took up from Paulhan and Frege (see Nissen, 2012a, ch. 5).

The productive transformation of sense to meaning implies the *generalizing* nature of recognition: As mentioned, recognition always implies more than a relation of one subject with another. It unfolds rather as the building of the realized generalizing ethics of a collective. Although recognition constitutes autonomy, it is never absolute, but a precarious autonomy that is founded on a universalizing ethics that substantiate it, and which is itself expanded in the process. This realized universalism is in fact a positive definition of a state, a political unit.

In other words, this reading highlights the *mediated* nature of recognition as key to its dialectics. In the SCHAT tradition, mediation is mostly known as the essential involvement of cultural meanings that are neither just free-floating semantic structures, discourses, or standards, nor simply fixed symbols regulating inter-subjective relations and interactions, but which relate these moments with one another productively through their externalization in material objects.

Thus, for example, the concept of ‘user’ is a discursive element and the form of a set of social relations that are objectified in texts that regulate certain contemporary drug treatment institutions, in websites, office buildings, scientific models etc. This is then the common sense in terms of which clients and counselors meet and do treatment, and which is continuously reproduced ... but which is also continuously broken up and transformed as meaning, as ‘real possibilities’ in practices that can be articulated critically with some concept of a “logic of care” as opposed to a (neo-liberal) “logic of

¹⁵ Thus, this marks a difference to the – otherwise at many points convergent – critique of Foucault and governmentality studies in Langemeyer, 2007.

choice”. The client submits to an interpellation as a ‘user’ (and the counselor to one as ‘service-provider’), but the practice of counseling calls forward other aspects that point beyond those identities. And the realization of those potentials then requires dealing critically with the institutional regulations that objectify the common sense “logic of choice”. In the process, the common sense of treatment is transformed as, for instance, the meaning of ‘narrative practice’ that implies the construction of ‘communities of concern’ (White, M., 1997), in which the ‘user’ is reconstituted as participant.

But – less discussed in SCHAT - mediation also implies the internal relations and entanglements of practices and collectives *across* their temporal and spatial extensions. Thus, for instance, counseling only makes sense in its relation to an everyday life elsewhere and to the hope of future personal development or cure (as highlighted in the narrative tradition); and the ethics of a social welfare state is articulated on the horizon of a certain collective hope, or utopia (of which the idea of ‘communities of concern’ forms part). On this basis, it recognizes ‘users’ and other subjects in their potentiality rather than their factuality.

All in all, the recognition that appears superficial at first, can push toward a deeper and more mutual kind of humanism that implies what Mattingly (2010) calls a “blues hope”, a hope that requires radical change, of participant subjects as well as of collectives. The ‘requirement’ is of course never guaranteed. The processes described here are always precarious. But that is just why we – as social theorists and / or as psychologists – can intervene, and think of what we do as ‘just in time’.

I suppose that some readers will find it frustrating that such a huge philosophical discussion is taken up – and of course, only given a sketchy treatment – at this point. But if a transformative activist stance means engaging with revolutionary practices, then we are sure to be confronted with such big issues. Social theory gets to be ‘just in time’ only by mediating such theoretical discussions, their complex histories and contentious hopes, with current practical and political problems – and vice versa. Allow me again to refer to the slightly more unfolded arguments in Nissen (2012a, 2013), and of course to the philosophical works referenced.

Beyond Neo-Liberal Standardization and its Others

The theoretical approach outlined in the previous section is relevant because it may provide us with ways of engaging with the troublesome issue that the practices of addiction prevention and treatment are the building of state institutions that actually include the wielding of power and only achieve a substantial recognition of users through their partial submission – as well as through the substantial transformation of state institutions that it will entail.

This is directly opposite to ruling ideas: The disguise or mock restructuring of state intervention as standard commodities for users or consumers of a civil society, and the emergence of international regulating institutions and discourses that facilitate this (such as the ICD). As we have seen, the structure and standpoint of civil society splits up recognition in the user’s free choice and her absolute surrender to the standard. In relation to the social problem of addictions, adopting this policy is like

trying to quench a fire with gasoline¹⁶, and in terms of formal governance, it even fails to meet its own purported standards: Visibly coercive and ineffective interventions abound (Bergmark, 2005; Carr, 2011). Whenever such ‘scandals’ are revealed, however, the likely reaction is another round of standardization.

The dialectical approach to recognition only breaks this cycle by going beyond the abstract universals of standardization. This is not achieved by inverting these universals into either particulars or a blank indetermination – by differentiating or rejecting standards – since such inversions are already intrinsic to standardization and New Public Management (cf. to this Busch, 2011)¹⁷. Rather, true ‘user-driven standards’ must evolve as *concrete universals*, that is, situated institutions that embody the collective ethics of a ‘logic of care’, as they provide material conditions, as they apply power, and as they both result from and facilitate negotiation, debate, and theoretically informed knowledge.

The activist participatory stance in this field, then, assumes a standpoint of social humanity that is concretized as the building of state institutions that embody ‘user driven standards’ and thus perform recognition in the more unfolded, mediated sense sketched above.

As ‘concrete utopia’ in Ernst Bloch’s sense, such ‘user-driven standards’ are already emerging, as tendencies in 12 step and other recovery communities, in narrative counseling, and many other practices¹⁸, if we take care to articulate and develop them in relevant ways, and do not shy away from the political struggles this entails (see, as examples of this, in the field of drug interventions, Nissen, 2009, 2013, 2012b).

Beyond the Liberal Utopianism of Marxism

But it also entails the political debate I mentioned above. In my view, we must finally dispense with the liberal utopianism that has always been part of Marxism, too. Even Marx and Engels – probably reacting to what they saw as Hegel’s conservative statism – would nurture the idea that there is some kind of untainted community (or we could call it ‘activity’) below the dirty superstructures of state and ideology, where the “real individuals” can be seen “empirically” to engage with each other and with nature (Marx & Engels, 2000).

To some extent the program of SCHAT has been the attempt to flesh out that vision. As we saw, this can be regarded as part of a wider scientific tendency. But it has also formed part of the anti-statist utopian current that has impeded the socialist movements’ reflection of their own political projects, and the disasters related to how they necessarily assumed the form of state power, even as they envisioned a “standpoint of social humanity”. This may be another reason why SCHAT has struggled so much with the functionalism / utopianism dichotomy that I mentioned at the start.

¹⁶ In passing, let me note that this is very much like the so-called ‘austerity measures’ where the current financial crisis that has developed because of an increasingly deregulated capitalism is met with further cutbacks and weakening of the states, first of all the already weak states such as those of Southern Europe.

¹⁷ Here we encounter another vicious cycle, the ‘bad infinity’ of simplicity and complexity. Much contemporary critical psychology and social science appear to be content with flipping the coin of reductionism by merely invoking multiplicity, diversity, heterogeneity, etc.

¹⁸ Even in some kinds of evidence-based policies that strive toward the utopian vision of a social engineering of the whole community – cf. the interpretation of Cochrane and his followers in Jensen, 2007, and Thorgaard, 2010.

In any case, if SCHAT is to take up its other side, its activist participatory stance, then it has got to develop ways to include a theorizing of power and utopia, in ways that go beyond not only the pretense of innocence, but just as much the pretense of cynicism.

This article was one attempt to push in that direction.

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